

***Mourning with Others: The Reorienting Practice of Grief***

Jessica Lussier with Vanessa Keller

Reflecting upon her year, New York City public school teacher Vanessa Keller<sup>1</sup> described how she left her classroom in March 2020 by packing up a handful of things thinking she'd return in just a few weeks, only to realize that over a year later she would still not be greeting her students in that classroom. Vanessa's story reflects a similar reality for thousands of educators across the country who were unexpectedly separated from their classroom, and students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Within the immense amount of grief and loss this past year, students and teachers lost not only their physical classroom spaces, but their routines, physical contact and other connections so integral to education. As Keller poignantly writes, "*our community struggled to cope with the trauma and losses, loss of life but also loss of our school as we knew it.*" As of June 9, 2021, the world had lost 3,750,197 human lives to Covid-19, over half a million of those deaths in the U.S. alone.<sup>2</sup> Those dying from Covid-19 are often forced to spend their final moments alone in the hospital, isolated from loved ones who are then asked to delay funeral gatherings because of the pandemic. Amidst the pandemic, the work of teachers has expanded far beyond Zoom calls and online lesson plans; thrust into online platforms with little or no training, educators were tasked with not only continuing to teach, but to care for their communities during this difficult time. As Keller describes "*...my co-teacher and I watched and listened over Zoom as sickness spread through*

*our classroom. We heard the coughing in the background and saw the worried faces of our students.*"<sup>3</sup> The pandemic has revealed more than ever our shared vulnerability and universal experience of loss. In caring for their students, classroom parents, and communities, teachers have become facilitators of the grieving process, rendering others capable of mourning the countless losses of this past year. Losses have ranged widely, from the death of a relative by Covid-19, to more subtle losses, such as the loss of routines, shared spaces, hugs, or goals. Against the backdrop of rising death tolls, these quotidian losses may not seem as dire, but they continue to affect the mental health and wellbeing of those who endure them. Within the process of mourning, we not only relearn our relationship with that which was lost, we also become reoriented to our world *after* loss. This necessarily involves time and space to experience grief, as well as bringing voice to one's loss. Prioritizing the mental, physical, and emotional health of their students, communities and educators, schools can support the mourning process by inviting space to grieve from this past year.

**The Work of Mourning**

Sigmund Freud, a foundational figure in Psychoanalysis, describes mourning as the "reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."<sup>4</sup> The German word "trauer,"

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Vanessa Keller for highlighting the many ways in which she, her school colleagues, and community have been deeply affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Her words (italicized) are woven into this writing as a guiding narrative to the thinking and ideas put forth here.

<sup>2</sup> John Hopkins University, *Coronavirus Resource Center*, June 9, 2021.

<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

<sup>3</sup> Vanessa Keller, *Response to Mourning-with Others*, Groundworks Panel at Philosophy of Education Society, March 6, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 243.

translated as “mourning” in Freud’s work, can mean both the *emotional experience* of grief and its *outward manifestation*. Grief thus refers to both the individual emotional state of bereavement, as well as the outward ways we exhibit grief (funeral gatherings, for example). Current popular psychology, however, often treats mourning as a temporary state that one needs to overcome or quickly work through by “staying positive.” The on-going pressures of work and productivity make pauses -- even for grief -- taboo. In contrast, Freud writes that mourning is something we are expected to overcome "after a certain lapse of time" and that any interference with it is “useless or even harmful.”<sup>5</sup>

Mourning is, however, a laborious and painful process. The “work of mourning” is described by Freud as a form of “reality-testing”, wherein the mourning subject, bit by bit, faces the reality that the loved object no longer exists. Anyone who has lost a loved one has had the experience of reencountering a place, smell, food or other experience that was shared with their lost loved one. Dwelling with loss, can leave us feeling distraught, isolated, or homesick for the familiar. Time continues moving forward as the mourning process draws us into the unraveling and weaving of our memories. While grieving, however, we are expected to continue living, getting out of bed, dressing and feeding ourselves despite the fact that our world feels like it has imploded. Similarly, teachers and students across the country have been denied time, and support, to be able to grieve the events of this past year. As educator Keller describes,

*... at a time when just the work of living is so much to handle, how are we all expecting families to be involved in their children’s education? How are we expecting children to be able to focus on a lesson being taught through a mask or a computer? How are we expecting teachers to prepare students for*

*standardized tests or report assessment data?*<sup>6</sup>

### “Unspeakable Loss”

In “the work of mourning” a mourner dwells with loss in order to assume a new orientation to their world, one that involves sustained remembrance of that which was lost in order to learn to live in a changed reality. This process, however, requires that the mourner not only be given the time and space to experience grief, but also the *language* to speak or confront their loss. The work of mourning is thus interrupted if one’s loss remains indescribable or unacknowledged as a loss. Philosopher of education James Stillwaggon examines the ways in which a standardized curriculum in schools can separate marginalized students from their home identities and how this loss can often remain unspeakable in the language of the curriculum. Looking at the tradition of democratic schooling, Stillwaggon writes that the educational promise of “growth” or transformation requires that students “trade their untaught pasts for competent futures,” where educational transformation presents itself as an inherent good.<sup>7</sup> His concern, however, is the loss that marginalized students may face when tasked to leave behind identities and attachments in order to become the “educated subject” that education promises.

Stillwaggon engages with Freud, and his interpreters, to discuss the relationship between “mourning” and “melancholia” and the unspeakability of some students’ losses to their homes and identities when in school spaces. The melancholic subject is often portrayed as one who fails to properly mourn their loss, by internalizing or retaining the loved object rather than offering up a public recognition. Challenging the notion of melancholia as an individual problem, however, Stillwaggon aims to return melancholia’s source to the domain of the social. As an example of this, Stillwaggon introduces us to one of his students, “Amy,” whose mother has been imprisoned for heroin.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 244.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, *Response to Mourning-with Others*.

<sup>7</sup> James Stillwaggon, ““A Fantasy of Untouchable Fullness”: Melancholia and Resistance to Educational

Transformation,” *Educational Theory* 67, no. 1 (2017): 54.

Amy must navigate not only this maternal absence but additionally the substitution of her grandmother in the parental role and the anti-drug campaigns prevalent in elementary curriculum. Amy's identity required living with the stigma of her mother's addiction while navigating the educational ideals of the school. There was little in the elementary school curriculum that could capture Amy's maternal void, and the complexity of their relationship. The mourning subject dwells with loss by engaging in the emotional labor of remembering their loss and is then able to take part in the outward manifestation of grief through language. In the example of Amy, we are reminded that "the moral discourses we teach children offer no way to mourn an incarcerated addict."<sup>8</sup>

In asking our students to take part in educational transformation, we are inevitably requiring that they suffer some form of loss in the process. Amy's loss was never fully lost as she lived within educational discourses that negatively judged her mother's addiction. Through the creation of a "found poem," using words cut from magazines and newspapers, Amy is able to discuss the subject of addiction, while maintaining distance from the problematic characteristics tied up in her maternal connection. She writes:

First, question why?  
 Do many people get high  
 on chemicals like  
 heroin  
 To [sic] cool to stop  
 Strange how they drop  
 For we must say no  
 For reasons we all know  
 Is there going to be an answer<sup>9</sup>

This use of borrowed language allows Amy's mother to become someone she can mourn, while maintaining an unspeakability within educational discourses.

From Amy's story we can begin to consider how our students are able to retain, and value, aspects of themselves that remain unavailable in school curriculums that dictate

what is mournable. If students' love or loss remains ungrievable in educational discourses, students may pull away or relinquish their relations to the school in order to maintain their identities and attachments.

Without the language to grieve, not all losses will be voiceable, or even registerable, to the subject who has experienced them. Like Amy, many losses of this past year have gone unrecognized or voiced.

This can provoke what bereavement expert, Kenneth J. Doka, refers to as "disenfranchised grief." Doka defines disenfranchised grief as "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported."<sup>10</sup> This type of grief often goes unacknowledged because either the *relationship* is not recognized, the *loss* is not recognized, or the *griever* is not recognized. Often the underlying assumption of "closeness" of a *relationship* is reserved for spouses or immediate kin, therefore losses of friends, ex-partners, and other nonfamiliar relationships are marked as "disenfranchised" or "secondary" to the mourning process. Disenfranchised *losses* can include losses that don't involve loss of human life, such as the loss of a pet, job, or quality time with others. Losses that can make others uncomfortable, such as a miscarriage or suicide, also often go unrecognized. Disenfranchised *grievers* may include individuals who are often not given the status of "griever," such as young children, the elderly, and marginalized others who are denied the time and space to engage in the mourning process. During this past year, many of us experienced the disenfranchised losses of plans, graduations, vacations, funerals, weddings, and other group gatherings due to Covid-19. The events of the pandemic have highlighted how pervasive disenfranchised grief is, and how ill-prepared we are to process it. Within schools, educators and students alike were pressured and strived to continue forward despite a sea of change and chaos. As Keller described, teachers were dealing with the

<sup>8</sup> Stillwaggon, "A Fantasy of Untouchable Fullness," 64.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 4.

*loss of our routines and physical contact, and loss of the confidence that one develops after years of teaching when thrust into a completely new platform with no training. There was no time to talk about or mourn these losses, there was no institutional support.*<sup>11</sup>

### **The Reorienting Practice of Grief**

Over the past year educators have been tasked with caring for not only their students, but for their communities, facilitating the mourning process of countless instances of disenfranchised grief. The process of grieving is not as simple as moving through stages or steps as it is popularly described. As Thomas Attig explains, grieving is not simply something that happens to us, it is “what we do in response. We relearn the entire world of our experience.”<sup>12</sup> Within the tremendous grief and loss of this past year, we were propelled into a new terrain of educational change. Schools, higher education institutions, formal and informal educational spaces were disrupted, subverted or otherwise altered in disorienting ways. Educators were responsible for navigating these changes not only for themselves, but for parents and students alike. Students’ home lives became their classroom space, inviting teachers to witness the struggling conditions that many faced within the pandemic. One-on-one meetings with families revealed stories of sickness, financial hardship, and physical displacement. Keller describes her caring response,

*We used the time to listen to children and help soothe emotions, but also to make sure each family has the essentials they needed like food and shelter so that we could connect families to community resources.*<sup>13</sup>

Teachers’ caring relationships with their students compelled them to make sure their physical and emotional well-being was being cared for amidst the challenges of the pandemic. However, fears of “learning loss” quickly led to a form of online schooling where learning and

teaching was expected to carry on as “normal.” Teachers were told to concentrate their efforts on academic data and test preparation while the pandemic continued claiming lives and protests against police brutality arose across the country. As Keller described, “*We were just struggling to keep our community safe and emotionally stable but we were being asked for reading levels and math scores.*”<sup>14</sup> Pressures from administrators to “move on” and continue through the curriculum presented educators with conflicting responsibilities, to care for both the emotional well-being of their students, as well as their academic progress. Students living in poverty are more likely to live in a home without the needed technology, internet access, or parental/caregiver supervision to complete required tasks of online schooling, thus leaving them more susceptible to “learning loss.” While wanting to prioritize the physical and emotional well-being of their students, educators also felt a responsibility toward making sure their students met benchmarks and passed exams, recognizing students gain access to future opportunities through these measurements. The conditions of the pandemic brought to light how teachers must mediate their ethical commitments, balancing their responsibilities toward both cognitive and social-emotional learning. Describing conflicting responsibilities of “care” felt by a school math teacher, philosopher of education Nel Noddings describes:

Her job is to teach mathematics, and she must find a way to do this. She also has an intellectual responsibility to the field of her academic expertise, mathematics. Yet her most deeply felt *moral* responsibility is to the cared-for, her student. To respond as carer to him, she must put aside, temporarily, the demands of the institution. She needs

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<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Response to Mourning-with Others*.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Attig, “Relearning the World: Always Complicated, Sometimes More Than Others,” in *Complicated Grieving and Bereavement*, eds. Gerry

Cox, Robert Bendiksen, and Robert Stevenson (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Keller, *Response to Mourning-with Others*.

<sup>14</sup> Keller, *Response to Mourning-with Others*.

time to build a relation of care and trust.<sup>15</sup>

The work of teachers over the past year has expanded far beyond lesson planning, instruction, and grading. Facing academic demands by administrative or institutional policies, educators during the pandemic were also tasked with reflecting on their own ethical commitments and responsibilities. Educators such as Keller recognized the importance of pausing and reflecting on the many losses of her students. By bringing voice to the disenfranchised grief within her own community, she first and foremost chose to prioritize her caring relationship with her students and families.

### **A Moment to Grieve**

Dwelling with loss is required to come to appreciate how the world has changed, and how we must change in order to renew our relationships. Many teachers and students across the country, however, have been denied the time, and support, to be able to grieve the events of this past year. In response to the pandemic, we cannot continue moving forward as if nothing has changed. The work of mourning requires that we look toward one another with care and concern. Many educators have already recognized the need to pause, reflect, and process the events of this past year. Doing so will involve mediating expectations put forth by administrators and districts; as Keller describes, *“this will require a pause in the more traditional aspects of schooling and the bureaucratic obligations of teaching. It will require funding, training, time, and compassion.”*<sup>16</sup> As we anticipate the decline of the pandemic, we can continue to mourn with one another, recognizing that our worlds have been reshaped in drastic ways. Teachers returning to their classrooms in the fall recognize that teaching and learning will continue to be deeply affected by the enormous amount of loss experienced across the globe. Reflecting upon the ethical commitments that emerged during this time, educators in a post-pandemic world are tasked with continuing to evaluate the questions, challenges, and losses

that the pandemic has brought about. There are no rituals or guidelines for the disenfranchised grief that many of us have experienced this past year. Instead, we face the possibility of moving forward by acknowledging collective losses, reorienting ourselves toward one another, and turning to the educational task of relearning our world together.

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<sup>15</sup> Nel Noddings, “The Caring Relation in Teaching,” *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 6 (2012): 774.

<sup>16</sup> Keller, *Response to Mourning-with Others*.